European Journal of
Studies in Management and Business

(Formerly Management and Business Research Quarterly)

2023(28)17–38

European Journal of Studies in Management and Business
Formerly Management and Business Research Quarterly
MBRQ
WWW.EUROKD.COM

Research Article
https://doi.org/10.32038/mbrq.2023.28.02

Systematic Post Crisis Tourism Supply Chain Transformation Towards Resilience in the Context of Tour Operators

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KEYWORDS

Tourism Supply Chain,
Tour Operators,
Transformation,
Resilience,
Post Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The significance of this manuscript lies in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, officially declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 30th of March, 2020, and its persistent influence on a global scale even after a span of three years. This unprecedented event has instigated impediments across diverse economic domains, with tourism and its intricate supply chains emerging as the most severely affected. The executed investigation delves into intra-organizational transformations within the framework of tourism supply chain management, particularly through the lens of tour operators, amidst the temporal landscape of both the pandemic era and its aftermath. Notably, numerous extensive service providers in the tourism sector have implemented strategies pertaining to tourism supply chain management transformations. Consequently, this article focuses on the efficacious transformations of tour operators, addressing pivotal constituents. The research findings delineate the repercussions induced by the pandemic on tour operators in Lithuania and consequently propose a resilience framework, contributing to the broader understanding of post-pandemic tourism supply chain transformation towards adaptability and resilience strategies.

Introduction

The tourism supply chain (TSC) denotes the intricate web of organizations, enterprises and activities engaged in furnishing goods and services to voyagers. Encompassing a diverse array of stakeholders collaborating to conceive and deliver travel experiences, understanding the intricacy

Received 25 August 2023; Received in revised form 1 October 2023; Accepted 22 October 2023

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and interdependence of these, constituents is imperative for the efficacious management and advancement of the tourism industry (Abdallah et al., 2021; Biao, 2014). In contrast to the prevailing adversarial relationships in the tourism industry tourism supply chain management (TSCM) introduces a transformative perspective. TSCM can be defined as a set of approaches employed to efficiently manage the operations of the tourism supply chain within a designated tourism destination (Matidinos & Mandilos, 2019; Guo & He, 2012). This management is aimed at meeting tourists' needs from targeted source markets and achieving the business objectives of diverse enterprises within the tourism supply chain (Papadopoulou, 2020; Song, 2012). The TSCM philosophy advocates a departure from arms-length relationships towards comprehensive management across organizations throughout the tourism supply chain at a specific destination (Shanker et al., 2021). The importance of managing the TSC within the tourism industry is paramount, particularly for large tour operators (TOs) striving to maintain a competitive edge over equally efficient rivals (Sifolo, 2020). According to the author, the efficacy of tourism supply chain management relies on the targeted initiatives undertaken by stakeholders within the chain (2020). Recent global developments underscore the need to view global crises, necessitating transformation frameworks, as adverse situations. In the current tourism business milieu, the sector is compelled to revamp its management strategies in response to continuous political disruptions. A contemporary approach to tourism supply chain management is essential to positively impact business and ensure durability (Guan et al., 2020; Sifolo, 2020). A well-functioning TSC strikes the optimal balance between efficiency and sensitivity, representing customer satisfaction. This equilibrium is shaped by the adopted tourism supply chain stakeholder performance and governing strategy (Berhanu, 2017). The strength of the supply chain is contingent on its weakest link, as accomplishments hinge on the entire chain (Sugiharti et al., 2021).

In the realm of tourism research, extensive focus has been channeled into comprehending relationships within the industry. Authors (Gonzales-Torres et al., 2021; Fong et al., 2021) point out that coordination among enterprises benefit the tourism industry. Prior studies have encompassed various topics such as integration within tourism supply chains, competitive dynamics, concerns related to hotels, tour operators, attractions, interactions between tour operators and destinations, relationships between tourism entities and tourists, and the evolutionary interplays between tourists and residents (Gonzales-Torres et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2013; Guo & He, 2012). An analysis of the literature reveals a predominant concentration on competitive interactions between TOs and other tourism entities, which often reflects the current state in many tourism markets. In the tourism sector, major tour operators are highly integrated with airlines, hotels, and other travel intermediaries (Sigala, 2008; Min, 2015). With their substantial market influence, tour operators directly engage with tourists, thus playing a pivotal role in reshaping tourism supply chains towards enhancing resilience. Tour operators hold a significant position within the tourism supply chain due to their pivotal role in coordinating various elements and shaping the travel experience for tourists. They act as crucial intermediaries, often connecting multiple components and services into comprehensive tour packages, which are then made available directly to the public or through travel agencies (Berhanu, 2017). Their influence often extends throughout the entire holiday experience, providing them with first-hand insights into the behavior and preferences of

tourists during their travel. These insights allow TOs to better understand the needs and demands of travelers and, subsequently, have a profound impact on the entire supply chain. TOs' role in connecting various stakeholders, procuring services, and catering to the specific demands of travelers solidifies their importance within the chain (Min, 2015). In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, it is pertinent to delve into how tour operator management strategies evolve during crises, spanning operational efficiency, alterations in employment relationships, approaches to retain and attract customers, considerations for liquidity during disruptions, and resilience against enduring adverse consequences.

The aim

Following an examination of the tour operator's vital role in facilitating the effective integration of the tourism chain network that supplies various components of tourism products and services, this study aims to substantiate the necessity for post crisis management transformation for tour operators.

The objective

The objective is to elucidate tour operator transformation principles and present a transformation towards resilience framework for the tourism supply chain, incorporating post crisis measures to be implemented.

Research methodology.

The research methodology encompasses content and comparative analysis, synthesis, and overarching generalization of the extant scientific literature. The validity of TSCM and its applicative approach to cultivating resilience in destinations is rooted in the meticulous comparative evaluation and coherent logical synthesis of research-derived assertions and methodologies documented within the body of scholarly works. These documents, delineating the nuances of the latter phenomenon, serve as a foundational bedrock for the establishment of the methodological framework of TSCM transformations and imply the novel contributions of this research endeavor. Additionally, qualitative study involving the six largest tour operators in Lithuania has been conducted to provide comprehensive insights. The findings are presented accordingly.

Tour operator significance in championing the efficient integration of the tourism chain network that furnishes diverse components of tourism products and services

Tourism has, throughout the preceding five decades, surfaced as one of the globe's most substantial and rapidly expanding economic sectors. Consequently, it has also evolved into one of the most universally embraced development strategies at the national, regional, and international echelons, constituting an efficacious and, for numerous countries, the sole pragmatic means of attaining social and economic development (Shanker et al., 2021; Sifolo, 2020; Papadopoulou, 2020). Tourism supply chain management comprises a collection of operative methodologies for the efficient coordination of relationships among stakeholders in the tourism supply chain (Papadopoulou, 2020; Matidinos & Mandilos, 2019). To facilitate seamless collaboration among all supply chain

stakeholders and ensure smooth information flow, companies must adeptly administer their business; harmonize, amalgamate, and optimize pivotal supply, production, warehousing, inventory, procurement, and sales procedures (Wilujeng et al., 2021). The disjointed yet closely interconnected nature of the tourism industry's components compels tourism enterprises to interact with numerous industry participants - suppliers, distributors, rivals, governmental and private entities - that dictate the continuity of TSC operations (Eckardt et al., 2020; Biao, 2014).

The tourism supply chain embodies an exceedingly expansive concept. In accordance with Guo and He (2012), TSC constitutes an industry amalgamating diverse services and professions, intricately linked to numerous domains of economic activity. Positioned at its core is the customer, surrounded by service providers encompassing accommodation, catering, transportation, sightseeing, entertainment industries, alongside outbound, domestic, and inbound tourism facilitators, such as tour operators, along with all associated services (Sifolo, 2020; Song, 2012). Within the latter category are activities like organizing and vending personal and business trips, searching and selling boats, ferries, buses, and plane tickets, transportation orders, insurance, money-back guarantee services, attraction bookings, and even destination weddings, among others. TSC plays a pivotal role as a catalyst for the economic development and integration of each country (Sigala, 2008). TSC is characterized by remarkable flexibility and, in contrast to other sectors, is frequently intricately interwoven with diverse industries such as fashion, aviation, cinema, music, crafts, gastronomy, and media, including blogging. Moreover, all services within TSC are unequivocally interconnected. Any disturbance to one segment of the chain reverberates across others (Wilujeng et al., 2021). This cascading effect disrupts the entirety of TSC operations, compromising corporate performance and profitability, and potentially inflicting irreversible harm upon tourism companies (Guan et al., 2020; Biao, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the tourism supply chain constitutes an intricate phenomenon necessitating comprehensive analysis and management from an integrated standpoint, predominantly through the lens of demand, a facet best apprehended by the primary tourist product provider—the tour operator (Partale, 2020). Based on the author, demand not only structures the evolution of specific tourism destinations but also encompasses value-creation processes, typically moulded by diverse operations and principal participants in the tourism supply chain system, with tour operators assuming pivotal roles (2020). Essential participants within the tourism value chain involve various processes intertwined with the tourism sector, such as policymaking and integrated planning; product development, promotion, and marketing; distribution and sales; destination operations; and tourism services (Mariani et al., 2016). The tour operator holds the distinction of being the largest retailer in the TSC domain, akin to a producer of organized tourism, occupying a unique position in shaping the entire tourism supply chain (Sigala, 2008). According to the author, the tour operator effectively orchestrates every participant in the TSC by devising tourist routes, enriching them with services, managing advertising, determining and establishing prices for travel on those routes, and directly vending travel to consumers or smaller travel agencies (2008). Tour operators strategically position themselves for consumers to whom they deliver services, simultaneously expanding the tourism supply chain system. Thus, tour operators emerge as a linchpin for the success of the entire chain (Fong et al., 2021).

In summary, tour operators assume a pivotal role in championing the efficient integration of the tourism supply chain network, unifying and orchestrating the diverse elements of tourism products and services. Moreover, tourists rely on tour operators to transform their envisioned vacations into reality. Opting for an outsourced, comprehensive package, whether time-tested or innovative, provides travellers with a convenient means to explore and immerse themselves in a foreign destination, ensuring they encounter the best attractions. A well-crafted bundle of services not only yields substantial profits for the tour operator but also contributes significant value to the tourism supply chain (Partale, 2020). Hence, tour operators play an essential role in championing for and realizing effective integration within the tourism supply chain. Their impact extends beyond merely selling travel packages; they function as coordinators, promoters, and facilitators, ensuring the seamless convergence of diverse components in tourism products and services to deliver meaningful and delightful experiences for voyagers.

Rationale for the necessity of post crisis tour operator transformation grounded by statistical and scientific literature examination

Tourism supply chain management transformation represents a continual and systematic process aimed at facilitating organizations' seamless transition to a desired state (Wilujeng et al., 2021; Sifolo, 2020). As indicated by the latter author, effective tourism supply chain transformation is a multidimensional process that demands organizational preparedness, managers possessing diverse competencies, and employees' readiness to accept changes (2020). The execution of change amid a pandemic poses challenges for every organization, necessitating adept management in a dynamically fluctuating environment (Gossling et al., 2020). The global ramifications of the pandemic profoundly impacted tour operators and subsequently the tourism supply chain. Impediments such as travel restrictions, lockdowns, and health-related concerns instigated an unprecedented surge in cancellations and refund requests, resulting in substantial revenue losses and strained financial resources (Gretzel et al., 2020). Numerous tour operators encountered a sharp downturn in revenue as bookings nearly ceased during the pandemic, directly influencing their financial viability (Gonzales-Torres et al., 2021). The pandemic disrupted the normal functioning of tour companies, compelling them to navigate through continually changing travel restrictions, quarantine mandates, and safety protocols, thereby complicating trip planning and execution. In response to diminished revenue, many tour operators were compelled to implement layoffs or furloughs, impacting both the livelihoods of their staff and the industry's overall workforce. Cash flow emerged as a critical concern, with cancellations and postponed bookings rendering it challenging to cover operational expenses and sustain business activities (Barua, 2021). Additionally, tour operators had to invest in health and safety measures to adhere to pandemic-related regulations, encompassing sanitization protocols, social distancing measures, and the provision of personal protective equipment for both staff and travellers.

In Lithuania, the tourism sector encountered a substantial contraction, experiencing a decline ranging from 70% to 80% in 2020 (Livina et al., 2021). Notably, tour operators within Lithuania incurred significant financial setbacks, recording a collective loss of €9.5 million in 2020. Furthermore, their income witnessed a notable decrease, averaging 42% in 2021 compared to the

pre-pandemic levels of 2019 (Livina et al., 2021; Aliu et al., 2021). The dynamic nature of the pandemic and the fluctuating conditions of quarantine presented formidable challenges in the planning of future operations within the tourism sector. The frequent alterations in pandemic severity and quarantine stipulations rendered objective assessments of travel conditions and associated risks virtually unattainable. This uncertainty was exacerbated by a lack of substantial government support and effective communication strategies, both of which played pivotal roles in shaping the financial predicament of tour operators. Compounded by the obligation to reimburse customers for travel expenses resulting from quarantine or emergency declarations, the economic strain on tour operators intensified. In navigating these challenges and sustaining liquidity, the tourism sector in Lithuania resorted to a multifaceted approach. This approach included the utilization of state-guaranteed loans, the implementation of downtime programs, subsidies directed at small and medium-sized enterprises, compensation measures for rent and interest, negotiations with creditors and partners, and partial restructuring initiatives. These diverse strategies were crucial in ameliorating the financial distress faced by the tourism sector in Lithuania during the tumultuous period influenced by the ongoing pandemic (Pociute-Sereikiene et al., 2022).

In a comprehensive examination of the post-pandemic landscape in 2021, researchers T. Gonzales-Torres et al. (2021) delved into the realm of tour operator restructuring within the tourism supply chain system industry in Spain. Employing qualitative interviews alongside an in-depth analysis of financial statements and relevant documents from selected companies, the study yielded insights into various change management processes adopted by companies. The emphasis was placed on maximizing the utilization of state support, coordinating financial and fiscal activities, fostering collaboration among tour operators, and implementing strategic management modifications (2021).

Similarly, German researchers Thams et al. (2020) conducted a study focused on unravelling the survival strategy adopted by the travel business in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research delved into the intricate relationship between business organizers and service users. The study underscored the critical importance of timely adaptation to changes and new working conditions, with the overarching objective of enhancing organizational performance levels and sustaining these improvements (2020).

The dynamic nature of the Covid-19 situation introduces variability in restrictions, subject to change at the international, regional, or destination levels. Despite advancements in vaccination campaigns, the potential influence of new variants adds complexity to the management strategies adopted by countries in response to the pandemic. The extent of losses incurred by tour operators exhibits considerable variation contingent on factors such as size, geographical location, and specialization. Smaller operators and those situated in tourism-dependent destinations have experienced pronounced adverse effects. As the industry undergoes recovery, tour operators are transforming strategies aimed at achieving financial stability, resilience, and effective adaptation to the modified tourism landscape (Sugiharti et al., 2021; Wilujeng et al., 2021).

The profound repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic on tour operators compelled the need for adaptation, innovation, and adept navigation to overcome unprecedented challenges (Pociute-Sereikiene et al., 2022). A comprehensive review of the literature accentuates the paramount

importance of implementing management transformation framework within the structures of the tourism supply chain. The literature underscores the significance of adapting to dynamic business conditions, potential adjustments in corporate governance strategies, and the critical analysis of shifts in corporate governance models and evolving consumer travel habits. In essence, the tour operator business underwent substantial transformations as a consequence of the far-reaching effects of the pandemics on the structures of the tourism supply chain. To substantiate the objectives of this article, an in-depth qualitative study will scrutinize specific instances of tour operators in Lithuania, providing insights into the nuanced implemented management transformations.

Scientific methodology

The chosen research methodology adheres to qualitative paradigms, specifically focusing on the principles of a targeted cohort's (tour operators) activities within specific conditions in their native habitat (the impact of the pandemic). This approach seeks to comprehend the subjects' experiences and deliver an interpretive, comprehensive assessment. Employing the phenomenological approach, the strategy opted for involves in-depth semi-structured interviews. This strategy accentuates the subjects' experiences (Dann et al., 2018). The semi-structured interview method relies on predetermined, specific questions outlined in the interview plan, with the researcher retaining the flexibility to pose additional questions during the research if deemed beneficial (Long & Chen, 2021). Qualitative research, in this context, is instrumental for generalizing the transformation, gaining insights, investigating the perspectives of tour operators and refining conceptual frameworks.

The representativeness of the qualitative research study is determined by flexible theoretical criteria (Dann et al., 2018). Given the detailed investigation inherent in each case during qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews, a smaller number of cases suffices to generate a substantial volume of data for the study's objectives (Nunkoo, 2018). For this research, a purposive selection of 6 informants was made, representing the largest tour operators in Lithuania. Among them, 4 respondents (X1, X2, X3, and X4) hail from large-scale tour operators, while 2 respondents (X5 and X6) represent medium-sized ones. The selected informants, referred to as experts, are senior employees or managers with no less than 5 years of experience in the field. The field-of-work status for experts X5 and X6 is classified as a travel agency, yet both confirmed involvement in organizing bus tours (X5) and diverse trips such as leisure, business, and conferences (X6). The interviews were conducted between March and April 2023. Initially, 8 questions were planned for the experts, but after validation with one of the interviewed experts, one question was omitted, resulting in a final set of 7 questions. The research questions were meticulously categorized into distinct blocks and sections, ensuring a systematic and organized approach to data collection. Adopting a qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological approach, the study placed particular emphasis on ethical considerations, acknowledging the close relationship between the researcher and participants inherent in this approach. Given that participants did not belong to vulnerable groups, the application of ethical principles encountered no notable challenges. Furthermore, the qualitative research design facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perspectives, contributing rich and nuanced insights to the overall study. The phenomenological

approach aimed to uncover the essence of participants' experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Principles of tour operator transformation management based on research findings

The qualitative expert inquiry conducted on tour operators has unveiled a substantial impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on their operational landscape, presenting a myriad of challenges in organizational processes. Recognized as one of the most formidable crises in the history of the travel business, all respondents underscored the onset of the pandemic as a transformative moment. This period witnessed a cessation in international movement, grounded air travel, and sealed borders. The performance of the tourism supply chain, heavily dependent on people's travels, faced a significant disruption as demand plummeted due to mandatory global quarantine measures. This led not only to a cessation of sales but also rendered the retrieval of contributions paid to intermediaries unattainable, posing difficulties for travellers seeking refunds for their booked trips.

Upon scrutinizing the responses of the experts (see Table 1), a unanimous consensus emerged regarding the acknowledgment of employees as the most valuable asset. Significantly, no employees were involuntarily terminated, with the reduction in workforce attributed to natural attrition or individual choices, as business operations came to a standstill. The strategic downsizing of the workforce was a response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic's impact on the travel industry.

Table 1.

Covid-19's influence on the tour operators: unraveling the effects

Section 1. Insights on the influence	
Subsection 1.1	*Alteration of operations post crisis*
Quotations: "The primary challenge posed by Covid was during the period of operational restrictions. The company declared downtime... as long as remote work was feasible, we persevered." - (X1) "It was challenging, but the company had ample funds to continue operations, hence the risk of termination was low..." - (X2) "...The most significant crisis in the history of the company..." - (X3) "...We did not lay off employees, but instead suspended operations; employees were on downtime and furloughs. At that time, the focus was on preserving businesses and jobs. The summer travel season in 2020 was very brief and exceptionally challenging for the entire tourism sector. Our activities remained limited throughout 2021. Striving to capitalize on all opportunities, we organized flights and facilitated conditions for partners to work and generate income. Those travel agencies that did not seize these opportunities and did not actively participate in sales were not as engaged as partners..." - (X4) "...Directly impacted one hundred percent; the pandemic years were a period of handling, maintaining communication with customers, attempting to retain and reassure them. We did not terminate longstanding employees, only those under probation, and a few individuals chose to leave..." - (X5) "One of the primary objectives was to maintain service continuity; the second was personnel retention. We endeavoured to retain employees, enabling them to work partly with us and partly elsewhere during downtime. State benefits were insufficient to cover full salaries. We barely survived for almost two years, depleting all resources, both human and corporate..." - (X6)	

Subsection 1.2	*Evaluation of losses*
Quotations:	
"...The total turnover for the entire year of 2020 is 82% lower compared to 2019." - (X1)	
"...The company has incurred substantial losses, but leveraging the opportunity, we will operate a specially purchased aircraft to cater to our customer's needs, aiming to control the crucial passenger logistics process without intermediaries..." - (X2)	
"...Experiencing an 88% decrease compared to 2019..." - (X3)	
"Estimating all the losses incurred by the company is challenging. Nonetheless, the impact of this pandemic on the company's financial performance and overall operations was undoubtedly significant..." - (X4)	
"...Facing losses exceeding 50%, everything came to a halt..." - (X5)	
"...Income plummeted by 77%, resulting in no profit, and the repercussions became evident by the end of 2022..." - (X6)	
Subsection 1.3	*Criteria contributing to minimising expenses*
Quotations:	
"...The company has optimized costs, achieving a reduction of more than half. Salary compensation has been utilized, and we have secured a loan to settle with travellers. Additionally, we are strategically working on enhancing our distribution channels to emerge stronger than ever after recovering from travel challenges." - (X1)	
"...We have received subsidies from investors and European funds. Until 2024, our plan is to significantly curtail costs..." - (X3)	
"...The company declared downtime, leading to a fifty percent reduction in salary funds. During this challenging period, our focus has been on preserving our business and jobs, and we've maximally optimized costs. Furthermore, the company secured a soft loan with state guarantee..." - (X4)	
"...We experienced partial downtime and availed assistance for office rent. If the owner reduces rent by 30%, 40% is covered by the state, and the remaining amount is borne by the agency. As part of cost optimization, we relinquished one office in Vilnius..." - (X5)	
"...The state facilitated payment for downtime. Although we did not receive a grant, state aid was delayed, reaching us only this year. The number of offices has remained unchanged..." - (X6)	

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of interviews.

The responses within the second subsection indicate that the travel business nearly came to a standstill with the advent of the pandemic, resulting in significant losses ranging from 77% to 88% (X1, X3, and X6). Substantial state aid was imperative. It can be posited that the state would incur higher expenditures on redundant workers through benefit payments for their reorientation; hence, it is more advantageous to subsidize the tourism sector to prevent layoffs. Respondents in both the 1st and 3rd subsections articulate that the primary objective was to safeguard the workforce by utilizing state support during downtime. As per the insights from the X5 expert, only employees on probationary periods were subject to layoffs. Novel reorganization strategies were also explored to fortify operations: as per the X2 expert, several meticulously planned strategic decisions regarding mergers and acquisitions were undertaken post-pandemic to enhance expertise and competencies, providing superior customer service upon the recovery of the tourism sector.

An analysis of responses from tourism experts reveals a consistent adoption of similar transformation measures by various tour operators to ensure the resilience of their businesses. In terms of management strategies, companies prioritized three critical performance factors to ensure operational continuity: employee retention, stabilization of customer relationships, and overall

business sustainability. During periods of downtime, state support was effectively utilized for employee retention, with dedicated resources allocated for staff training initiatives. Soft loans were strategically sought to meet customer demands and prevent financial insolvency. Additionally, accumulated company funds from the previous year were deployed without distributing dividends. However, there was a notable diversity in organizational approaches. Some companies implemented survival-focused tactics, emphasizing cost optimization, liquidity management, and the careful handling of financial flows and liabilities. In contrast, others took a proactive stance by preparing for future market recovery. This proactive approach involved portfolio revisions, adjustments to contractual terms, enhancements in information dissemination channels, investments in equity development, adoption of new technologies and reservation systems, and the expansion of service offerings to emerge "stronger than ever" post-quarantine and travel restriction alleviation (X1). The limited adoption of such strategies by some agencies may be attributed to factors such as a lack of clear vision, trust, technological infrastructure, financial resources, and competent human resources essential for optimizing company performance during the pandemic. It is crucial to scrutinize the specific changes implemented by companies aiming to enhance their attractiveness post-recovery, and these details are outlined in Table 2.

In summary, the findings highlight a dualistic approach within the industry, where some companies strategically focused on immediate survival measures, while others invested in long-term resilience and growth. This diversity underscores the importance of adaptive strategies tailored to specific organizational contexts and market conditions. Companies with a forward-thinking perspective and the capacity for technological adaptation appear better positioned for sustained success in the evolving tourism landscape (Papadopoulou, 2020).

Table 2.

Implementation of management transformation

Section 2. Insights on the implementation of management transformation	
Subsection 2.1	*Implementing innovations through ASIT (Agency for Scientific Innovation and Technology)*
Quotations: "Certainly, innovations in tourism have been introduced in the travel business..." - (X1) "...Did not participate." - (X2) "...Did not participate." - (X3) "...We have created and integrated an electronic claims register..." - (X4) "...We initiated a marketing IT project that will be initiated in September 2023. This includes website updates, the implementation of gift voucher sales principles, focus on “staycations”, “work holidays” and for long haulers – new destinations ..." - (X5) "...We implemented and enhanced the CRM (customer relationship management) system and SEO (search engine optimization), along with Google awards training..." - (X6)	
Subsection 2.2	*Perceptions of circumventing regularization*
Quotations: "...Our emphasis has been on enhancing optimization, and we are presently refining customer service. Customers are assured warranty insurance, ensuring all their funds for future travel are protected..." - (X1)	

"...Since the spring of 2022, we have transitioned to more modern aircraft and improved our scheduling for enhanced market advantages..." - (X2)
"...The company was honored as a preferred tour operator, emphasizing long-term collaboration with loyal customers. Prioritizing the safety of employees and customers, new security protocols have been implemented at airports and ships, resulting in faster, more cost-effective synergy. The initiatives include restructuring, digitizing activities, and optimizing airlines and orders..." - (X3)
"...It is of utmost importance to set accurate expectations and foster a personal connection, offering relevant services to the client. Our focus is on advertising..." - (X5)
"...CRM..." - (X6)
Subsection 2.3 *Retail*
Quotations:
"...Sales have been automated for an extended period; customer service centers function effectively, and during office hours, older individuals or those facing challenges with internet usage often visit..." - (X3)
"...Online travel is more cost-effective, hence encouraging online transactions..." - (X4)
"100% online retail. Some individuals visit the office if they prefer cash transactions. Exotic travel arrangements require more detailed discussions, and perhaps people feel more confident having face-to-face interactions with us..." - (X5)
"...During the pandemic, confidence in online ticket purchases has diminished due to service shortcomings or difficulties in communication..." - (X6)
Subsection 2.4 *Framework for durability*
"...The advantages include collaboration with stakeholders, flexibility in planning activities, a dynamic pricing system, the ability to swiftly alter destination directions, an extensive range of services, and adaptability to external alterations..." - (X1)
"This year is dedicated to customers, and we will exert every effort to challenge established market standards. Our goal is not only to introduce new destinations but also to offer expanded travel products." - (X2)
"...Emphasizing flexibility, customer satisfaction, relinquishing rigidity in operations through a synergy model - adapting to market changes with speed and efficiency..." - (X3)
"...Prioritizing flexibility and adjusting to alterations..." - (X4)
"...Believe in traveling..." - (X5)
"...Emphasizing the need to be flexible..." - (X6)

Source: compiled by the authors based on the results of interviews.

The majority of enterprises seeking financial support have enhanced and refined their services through the implementation of innovative information systems, travel reservation systems, and online services. Concurrently, some enterprises have developed augmented presentations of their services and virtual video tours. It could be hypothesized that the remaining enterprises refrained from participating in the innovation tender due to the limited timeframe for innovation implementation, which was only a few months. The selection of innovation might be contingent on various factors. It is imperative to assess the added value that the new product or service will offer to target customers, determining its utility and attractiveness. Additionally, potential added value must be considered, as every innovation demands investment, including time and staff resources, with economic benefits or payback realized in the future. New products in the tourism sector

stimulate fundamental shifts in tourists' motives for selecting specific nature, routes, and destinations.

The significance of averting homogenization within a company was scrutinized by Abdallah et al. (2021). According to them, consumer attitudes toward the company, facilitated by the organization's flexibility, directly impact the financial metrics of the organization. Alterations in these metrics can serve as a signal to managers and owners to reassess and avoid antiquated business strategies and methods (2021). Almost all the interviewed experts emphasized that close personal contact with customers (X2), analysis of their needs (X4, X5, X6), an image of company reliability, customer safety during travel (X3), as well as increased operational efficiency, relationships with other stakeholders, and the quality of customer service (X1) are fundamental principles for avoiding homogenization. However, if all tour operators adhere to the aforementioned principles, what sets them apart? How do organizations strive to be distinctive? Expert X5 provided the answer - marketing and online advertising. Digitalization is a powerful tool for implementing diverse marketing strategies, but it necessitates considerable human, financial resources, and systematic effort, as confirmed by expert X6 in the first category, asserting that the prolonged pandemic and quarantine required more effort to attract customers than before.

The prompt adaptability to market changes stands as a critical determinant for the survival of tour operators (Fong et al., 2021). The continuous evolution of technology presents challenges and opportunities for both organizations and service users alike. According to authors, the prevalence of online services is expected to increase over time. In the 2.3 sub-category, experts assert that there are no substantial barriers to online purchases (X3, X4, X5), although it is noteworthy that direct contact remains preferable, particularly for elderly customers or those booking exotic trips. Such customers may seek additional details derived from the personal experiences of employees regarding specific destinations (X5). Expert X1 highlights that online travel tends to be more cost-effective, contributing to a heightened interest in online trip purchases. Summarizing the insights from tourism experts on online bookings, it can be inferred that this factor uniformly impacts all tour operators, leading to a reduction in the number of direct contacts in companies. While the European Commission actively advocates for digital transformation, it is crucial to recognize, as in the 2.1 sub-category, that both innovation and online technologies serve as valuable tools for implementing diverse marketing strategies. However, they also demand substantial human, financial, and systematic resources for effective implementation and sustained success in the competitive landscape.

Optimal equilibrium is indispensable in every organizational framework. Achieving a transformed balanced solution at the opportune moment constitutes the foundation for a prosperous business (Long & Chen, 2021). As the tourism business came to a standstill during the pandemic, tour operators faced the imperative task of striking a delicate equilibrium between survival and the anticipation that, with improvements in the epidemiological situation, a resumption of operations on a suitable scale would become feasible. According to insights from various experts, certain companies opted to divest loss-making assets and terminate collaborations with non-performing agents. In contrast, others strategically invested in property, realigned travel routes to provide customers with exceptional services upon the reopening of borders. However, it can be postulated

that throughout the pandemic, the paramount focus for resilience was directed towards fostering flexibility (X1, X3, X4, and X6), adapting to market changes (X1, X4), maintaining faith in travel (X5), and innovating new products (X2).

In summary, the measures examined during the expert interviews for the effective transformation of tour operators post-crisis comprised as follows: strategic investments in human resources and innovative solutions, embracing digitalization and automation of operational processes, ensuring accurate alignment with customer expectations, optimizing costs, maximizing the prudent use of public funds, adopting flexible sales conditions, maintaining ongoing collaboration and improvement with stakeholders and service providers, reimbursing deposits from partners in the tourism supply chain, prioritizing future sales strategies, providing dedicated customer care, diversifying destinations with a focus on secure areas, and ensuring comprehensive operational flexibility. These measures collectively underline the multifaceted approach required for the rejuvenation and resilience of tour operators after a crisis. Strategic investments in both human capital and innovative technologies contribute to building a robust foundation. The emphasis on digitalization and automation aligns with contemporary trends in enhancing operational efficiency. Cost optimization, prudent financial management, and flexibility in sales conditions are critical for navigating uncertain economic landscapes. Collaborative efforts with stakeholders and service providers signify the importance of a networked approach for sustained success. The focus on customer care, returning deposits, and expanding to secure areas underscores the significance of building trust and adapting to evolving customer preferences and safety concerns.

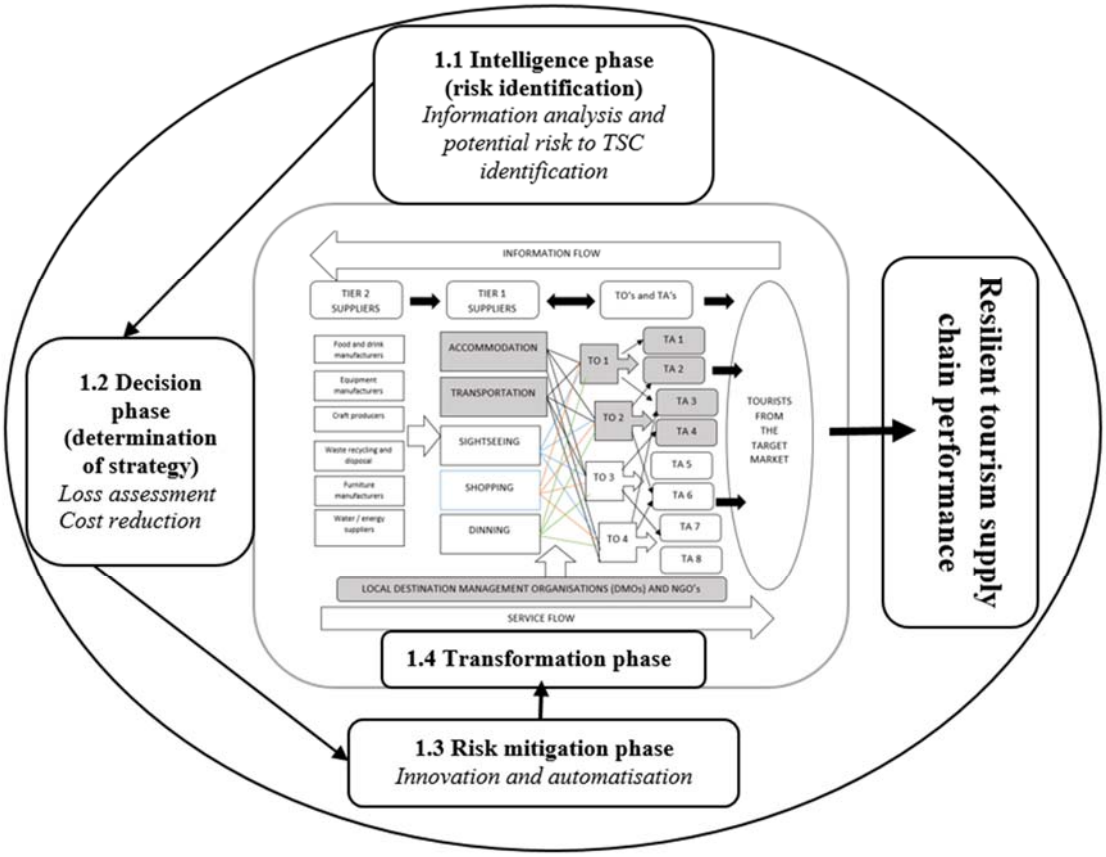
Transformation framework proposal

The process of organizational transformation involves adaptation, particularly during a crisis induced by a pandemic, where changes become imperative (Livina et al., 2021). A streamlined and timely restructuring procedure empowers organizations facing temporary challenges to redefine their operations, revise the company's strategy, discontinue unprofitable activities, and prioritize the most efficient ones (Papadopoulou, 2020). Stakeholders within the tourism supply chain who successfully navigate challenges are those proactively monitoring and evaluating key performance indicators. When these indicators signal unsatisfactory performance, proactive measures are taken to enhance their operations, effectively instigating transformation (Long & Chen, 2021). Consequently, to ensure the sustained viability of this sector in the future, a comprehensive transformation management becomes imperative. This approach aims to retain competent staff, reimburse deposits for services not rendered, and navigate frozen funds with various foreign partners. Traditional transformation solutions are directed towards improving the overall state of the tourism supply chain, facilitating effective transformation implementation. However, the utilization of crisis management frameworks often lacks prompt results, as decisions to manage them are frequently made belatedly, initiated after the crisis has already taken root. Therefore, the integrated approach to transformation in the tourism supply chain underscores the critical need for proactive measures during crises. Transformation in the face of crisis involves not only reshaping operations but also strategically discontinuing unprofitable activities to enhance overall efficiency. Monitoring key performance indicators and taking timely actions based on the insights gained are

pivotal for successful transformation. The emphasis on retaining competent staff and reimbursing deposits reflects a commitment to ethical business practices and stakeholder satisfaction. The recognition of the delay in decision-making during crises highlights the importance of adopting proactive strategies for transformation management (Shanker et al., 2021; Sifolo, 2020). The four-phase transformation management framework, proposed by the authors and based on the latter studies, serves as a structure for navigating through the complexities of transformation within the tourism supply chain. Each phase holds its own significance, requiring meticulous execution for successful transformation implementation. (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Tourism supply chain post crisis transformation framework in the context of tour operators



Source: compiled by the authors

1.1 Intelligence phase: in this phase, both internal and external information of utmost relevance, with a particular emphasis on the pivotal role of tour operators within the tourism supply chain, is systematically collected and analysed (Shanker et al., 2021). Tour operators play a crucial role in orchestrating and coordinating various components of tourism products and services, making their insights indispensable in this comprehensive analysis. The focus is not only on general risk analysis but also on understanding the specific challenges faced by tour operators, given their central position in the tourism supply chain (Zukhuri & Rosalina, 2020). Authors comment that emphasis

is placed on identifying and addressing emerging risks, with a keen eye on how these risks might impact the entire tourism supply chain, especially tour operators who act as key intermediaries between various service providers and end customers (2020). Concurrently, the monitoring of risks is integral to adapt strategies promptly. Risk analysis is grounded in scrutinizing historical issues, forecasting their occurrence for specific customer segments, and substantiating the methods employed for anticipating potential risks (Vargas, 2020). Tour operators' historical data and experience become instrumental in providing valuable insights into potential risks associated with customer preferences, destination choices, and overall travel patterns.

Formal methods, such as market analysis for external information and financial statement analysis, management interviews, and surveys for internal information, are employed (Vargas, 2020). The involvement of tour operators in these formal methods ensures that their unique perspectives, derived from direct interactions with customers and suppliers, are considered in the risk analysis process. Additionally, informal methods, such as observation and discussions with tour operators, contribute to a comprehensive understanding (Sugiharti et al., 2021). This holistic approach ensures that both quantitative and qualitative aspects are taken into account, aligning the analysis with the intricate dynamics of the tourism supply chain.

Crucially, within the information analysis phase, it is imperative to discern between pertinent and irrelevant information (Sifolo, 2020). This discernment ensures a focused approach to the specific problem under consideration, with tour operators playing a vital role in filtering and providing context to the information. Their expertise in navigating the complexities of the tourism supply chain is invaluable in determining the relevance and significance of various data points, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and effective risk analysis process.

1.2 Decision-making phase: the significance of threat analysis in this phase is underscored by its crucial role in shaping decisions related to security planning and risk reduction measures, particularly considering the pivotal role of tour operators within the tourism supply chain. Management decisions, often grounded in cost information, gain a deeper dimension when tour operators' perspectives are considered (Min, 2015). In conformity with the author, tour operators are not only significant contributors to the revenue streams but also serve as crucial intermediaries between various components of tourism products and services (2015). Therefore, their insights become paramount in aligning cost-related decisions with broader strategic goals.

Necessitating a clear definition of objectives, these objectives are intricately linked to the role of tour operators in the supply chain, as they revolve around reducing losses incurred by the tour operator, who, as a linchpin in the tourism supply chain, faces unique challenges and vulnerabilities (Sifolo, 2020). Furthermore, the objectives extend to enhancing operational efficiency within distinct operational processes, an aspect where tour operators' expertise in streamlining complex logistics and coordinating diverse services is indispensable. This phase not only facilitates an assessment of risks but also, and perhaps more critically, guides the measurement, anticipation, and evaluation of risks specific to the tour operator (Sugiharti et al., 2021). The centrality of tour operators in the supply chain introduces a nuanced understanding of risks, considering their intricate interactions with customers, service providers, and other stakeholders (Berhanu, 2017). The comprehensive threat analysis, with tour operators as focal points, ensures that risk management

strategies are tailored to address the specific challenges faced by this key player in the tourism supply chain.

1.3 Risk mitigation phase: in this phase, recognizing the pivotal role of tour operators within the tourism supply chain becomes paramount, especially in the creation and implementation of security and risk reduction measures (Shanker et al., 2021). Tour operators, positioned at the nexus of various components in the supply chain, are instrumental in shaping and executing strategies that pre-empt potential emergency situations or, if they arise, minimize their impact (Berhanu, 2017). The significance of tour operators in predicting and preventing adverse situations is multifaceted, according to Berhanu (2017) and given their comprehensive understanding of the tourism landscape, tour operators contribute unique insights into potential risks that might emanate from diverse sources such as geopolitical changes, public health crises, or environmental factors (2017). Their role extends beyond mere risk identification; they actively participate in the formulation of effective risk management policies, leveraging their position to coordinate efforts among different stakeholders in the supply chain (Sigala, 2008).

An effective risk management policy, tailored with the expertise of tour operators, ensures the seamless implementation of risk management practices across the supply chain (Wilujeng et al., 2021; Vargas, 2020). Tour operators, acting as linchpins, can foster collaboration among accommodation providers, transportation services, and other entities to establish standardized safety protocols and contingency plans. Importantly, the choice of risk mitigation measures within the tourism supply chain, underpinned by the insights of tour operators, should align with the specific risk levels encountered (Zukhuri & Rosalina, 2020), as it is crucial that the costs associated with these measures remain proportionate to potential losses. Tour operators, with their intricate knowledge of customer expectations and industry dynamics, contribute to a nuanced evaluation of the trade-off between losses due to risk realization and the costs incurred for implementing risk reduction measures. This ensures that mitigation strategies are not only effective but also economically viable, safeguarding the resilience of the entire tourism supply chain (Bao & Dai, 2021).

1.4 Transformation management: in this phase, particularly crucial in the dynamically evolving tourism business environment exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the pivotal role of tour operators within the tourism supply chain becomes evident in shaping the goals and objectives of a robust change management strategy (Vargas, 2020). Based on the author, the objectives of a transformation are intricately linked to the operational risk within the tourism supply chain, and this is where the multifaceted contributions of tour operators come to the forefront (2020). A detailed breakdown of the entire management process into pertinent systems and their elements is indispensable (Thams et al., 2020). Key elements, including the management strategy, risk measurement system, information flow and sharing system, and power control system, collectively define the landscape of transformation (Gretzel et al., 2020). In this intricate web of systems, tour operators serve as linchpins, facilitating effective communication, collaboration, and strategic alignment among diverse stakeholders.

The integration of all these inherent elements underscores the comprehensive nature of transformation management within the tourism supply chain. Tour operators, with their

comprehensive understanding of the industry, customer expectations, and operational intricacies, are central to this integrated system (Berhanu, 2017). Their role is not merely observational; according to the author, instead, they actively contribute to the analysis of systemic risk management elements, which involves leveraging their insights to comprehend the effective operation principles of these elements, categorizing the most characteristic connections, and determining the purpose and objective function variables of the entire system (2017). The involvement of tour operators ensures that the transformation strategy is not only robust but also aligns seamlessly with the complex dynamics of the tourism supply chain (Long & Chen, 2021; Papadopoulou, 2020).

To encapsulate all four stages, the presented framework comprehensively covers the pivotal phases of the transformation management modifications within the tourism supply chain, offering insights into the multifaceted post-crisis environment. This four-stage implementation framework captures the competitive main stakeholder relationships formed among horizontal suppliers (tour operators, travel agencies, and accommodation and/or transportation sectors), the subsequent impact of decisions on vertical (socio-ecological system, TSC stakeholders tier 1 or 2, and local government), and diagonal suppliers (all TSC). It delineates the resultant overall changes in the structure of the tourism supply chain, contributing to the modification of tourism supply chain management through a coopetitive tour operator lens. This lens defines the triadic relational links among horizontal, vertical, and diagonal suppliers. Transformation management in the tourism supply chain involves a systematic approach and strategies for planning, implementing, and adapting to changes. For tour operators, strategic and proactive transformation is imperative for competitiveness, resilience, and responsiveness to external factors, exemplified by the Covid-19 crisis. This approach considers the needs of all stakeholders while promoting resilience and responsible business practices. The four stages outlined illustrate the transformation undertaken by tour operators in Lithuania, as evidenced by the conducted study.

Conclusions

Tour operator significance in championing the efficient transformation

The swift spatial dissemination of the Covid-19 epidemic outbreak has resulted in the comprehensive economic disruption of the tourism supply chain, leading to substantial reductions in revenue and posing liquidity challenges for all stakeholders involved. The intricate interconnections within the tourism supply chain amplify the impact of shocks, with disturbances in one segment swiftly cascading to others, inducing a chain reaction of effects. Effective management within the supply chain emerges as a pivotal determinant for achieving and sustaining competitiveness. Tour operators play an indispensable role in championing the effective integration of the tourism chain network, assuming a central position as pivotal orchestrators that interconnect and synchronize various components within the intricate framework of the tourism industry. This research underscores the profound significance of tour operators in the harmonization of diverse elements, encompassing travel agencies, accommodation providers, and transportation sectors. Their role is paramount in ensuring a cohesive and seamless delivery of tourism products and services, acting as linchpins that facilitate the smooth operation of the entire tourism supply chain.

Tour operators, being the largest retailers within the tourism supply chain, assume a central and influential role in the overall success of the entire network. Their strategic position allows them to navigate and coordinate the various components efficiently. In light of the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the research underscores the necessity of a focused examination of tour-operator post-crisis transformation management. This emphasis is justified by recognizing the critical role played by tour operators in steering the tourism supply chain towards resilience. Their role extends beyond that of conventional retailers; they are pivotal change agents, and understanding and addressing their post-crisis transformations is imperative for the effective rejuvenation of the broader tourism supply chain.

Rationale for the necessity of post crisis tour operator transformation

The comprehensive scrutiny of statistical literature unambiguously substantiates the compelling necessity for post-pandemic transformation within the tour operator business. Scientific literature analysis further elucidates that the tour-operator sector bore the brunt of the pandemic's impact within the tourism supply chain. The implementation of restrictions, consumer apprehensions, and global efforts to mitigate the virus's spread precipitated a setback in the travel industry comparable to that experienced three decades ago. This downturn significantly affected key participants in the tourism supply chain, particularly in the cruise, aviation, and accommodation industries, accentuating the imperative for effective transformation processes. The literature underscores that the transformation process harbours substantial potential for fostering growth and further development, serving as a guarantor of survival and heightened competitiveness for organizations, such as tour operators, within the post-crisis landscape.

The extensive research highlights the profound impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the tourism industry, necessitating adaptive strategies to address the dynamic shifts in customer demands, market trends, and external factors. Given their pivotal role as key stakeholders, tour operators are compelled to proactively engage in change management, ensuring the sustenance of competitiveness, resilience, and adaptability within the rapidly evolving landscape. Tourism supply chain transformation emerges as an indispensable requirement for the survival and heightened competitiveness of businesses, with tour operators positioned at the forefront of this transformative process. The article accentuates the paramount importance of various factors, encompassing strategic planning, employee empowerment, business flexibility, stakeholder relationship management, as well as innovations, digitalization, automation, and meticulous attention to customer expectations, cost optimization, public fund utilization, flexible sales conditions, collaboration, deposit returns, emphasis on future sales, customer-centric care, and the strategic expansion of destinations. The collective integration of these elements contributes synergistically to fortify the resilience of tour operator businesses in the post-pandemic landscape.

Transformation principles of tour operators

The ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism business have been profound and complex, ushering in unprecedented transformations within the industry. The initiation of the pandemic triggered a cascade of challenges that permeated the entire tourism supply chain,

impacting diverse stakeholders and fundamentally restructuring the dynamics of the travel sector. The outcomes of the research offer invaluable insights into the guiding principles that necessitate adoption by tour operators. Informed by the scientific inquiry, tour operators must prioritize strategic restructuring, operational efficiency, and innovative methodologies. The research-derived principles encompass the adaptation of business models, the comprehensive integration of risk management strategies, and the strategic utilization of digitalization and automation. These transformative principles prove indispensable for tour operators, not solely for navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic but also for emerging as more robust and adaptable entities in the post-pandemic tourism landscape.

The profound alterations induced by Covid-19 underscored the urgency of swift transformation implementation for tour operators. The devised framework stands as an instrumental blueprint for initiating and executing tourism supply chain transformations during crises. A seamless and timely transformation process empowers stakeholders grappling with temporary challenges to reshape their operations, recalibrate strategies, divest from unprofitable activities, and concentrate on the most efficient ones. This underscores the imperative of adaptability in the face of crises and positions tour operators for enhanced resilience and success.

Discussion

How to enhance tourism supply chain performance towards resilience in the context of tour operators in the face of crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has undeniably triggered unprecedented challenges across the global tourism industry, prompting a re-evaluation of strategies and operational frameworks. Amidst the multifaceted disruptions experienced by the tourism supply chain, tour operators, as pivotal players, find themselves at the forefront of necessary transformations to not only survive but thrive in the post-pandemic era.

The profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism supply chain is evident. The interconnected nature of the various components, including cruise, aviation, accommodation industries, and notably, tour operators, has led to a cascading effect, severely affecting revenue streams and operational stability.

Tour operators emerge as central figures in the tourism supply chain, recognized as the largest retailers within the industry. Their role as linchpins connecting and harmonizing various components is pivotal for the seamless delivery of tourism products and services. This significance is further highlighted in the post-pandemic landscape, where effective change management becomes imperative.

Scientific literature and statistical analysis emphasize the necessity for post-pandemic change management within tour operators. This involves a multifaceted approach, focusing on several key elements and principles.

- Strategic transformation: tour operators need to engage in strategic transformation to adapt to evolving customer demands and market trends. This may involve revising portfolios, contractual terms, and enhancing information distribution channels.

- Operational efficiency: operational efficiency is paramount for survival. This includes optimizing costs, managing financial flows and liabilities, and proactively preparing for the future and market recovery.
- Innovation and digitalization: embracing innovation and digitalization is crucial. Tour operators must invest in new technologies, reservation systems, and online services to stay competitive and meet the changing preferences of travellers.
- Risk management: a comprehensive risk management strategy is indispensable. This involves anticipating and addressing emerging risks, leveraging both formal methods such as market analysis and informal methods like observation to ensure a focused approach.
- Resilience is a cornerstone of tour operator performance. Building resilience involves not only adapting to immediate challenges but also preparing for unforeseen disruptions. Resilient tour operators can withstand shocks, recover quickly, and continue delivering services in the face of adversity.

The Covid-19 crisis has accentuated the importance of adaptability, transformative strategies, and resilience for tour operators. Rapid implementation of transformation frameworks becomes a key differentiator in the face of challenges. Effective transformation enables tour operators to reshape their operations, adjust strategies, abandon unprofitable activities, and focus on the most efficient ones. The developed framework serves as a robust instrument for initiating and executing tourism supply chain transformations during crises. This framework underscores the need for a seamless and timely transformation process, allowing stakeholders to navigate challenges effectively, while placing a premium on resilience as a key attribute for long-term success.

In conclusion, the tourism supply chain, particularly tour operators, faced unprecedented challenges in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The emphasis on performance improvement during a crisis is evident in the need for systematic transformation, operational efficiency, innovation, comprehensive risk management, and resilience. The tour operators that successfully implement these strategies, demonstrating resilience, position themselves not only for survival but for sustained viability and adaptability in the dynamic post-crisis tourism landscape.

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Acknowledgments
Not applicable.

Funding
Not applicable.

Conflict of Interests
No, there are no conflicting interests.